

A

No 17.

SERMON

Preach'd before HER

MAJESTY

AT

Saint JAMES's Chappel,
On Sunday, September 29, 1706.

ECCLES. VIII. Ver. 11.

Because Sentence against an evil Work is not executed speedily, therefore the Heart of the Sons of Men is fully set in them to do Evil.

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L O N D O N:

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ECCLES. VIII. Ver. 11.

Because Sentence against an evil Work is not executed speedily, therefore the Heart of the Sons of Men is fully set in them to do Evil.

THE Observations of the wiser part of Mankind (those especially concerning the Divine Providence or Human Nature) have been always deservedly regarded, as instructive in the Conduct of Human Life.

That particular Observation, which I have made the Subject of my Discourse, relates both to the Administration of Divine Providence, and the Tendency of Human Nature; and is supported by a long Experience, in Conjunction with the Authority of the Wise and Royal Preacher.

Wherefore that I may not detain this Audience with any farther needless Preface, I proceed directly to consider the main Design of my Text, under the following Heads of Discourse; in which I will endeavour,

First, To shew in what Sense this Observation of *Solomon* is to be understood, as to both the parts of it; that Sentence is not executed speedily, and that therefore Men are more outrageously wicked.

Secondly, To enquire into the Connexion of these two Parts; how it comes to pass that the slow Execution of the Divine Sentence has such a fatal Influence on Men. But then,

Thirdly, I will also endeavour (in prosecution of the Design in the Text) to vindicate this Suspension of the Divine Sentence; and to shew that men argue absurdly and perversly; if for that Reason their Hearts

are fully set in them to do Evil. After which it may be pertinent to the Subject, in the

Fourth and Last place, To lay before you the true Use and proper Influence of this Providential Administration; and because Sentence is not executed speedily, to shew how all our Hearts should be affected in us.

First then, Suffer me briefly to consider in what Sense this Observation is to be understood, in both Parts of it. For it is not laid down as an universal Rule, either that Sentence is never speedily executed, or that the Heart of *all* the Sons of Men are, therefore, fully set in them to do Evil.

It's well known that Moral Observations and Maxims have a sufficient Foundation, if they hold true in the general, notwithstanding there may be several Exceptions to them.

Accordingly *Solomon* could not be ignorant of Exceptions to the Rule himself lays down, in the miraculous Successes of his own People, and the speedy Divine Sentence upon those wicked Nations round about them. From the time that all the Plagues fell on *Egypt*, to the Establishment of the Throne in his Father *David*, their whole History is a continu'd Relation of the speedy Execution of the Divine Sentence against evil Works, as *Moses* expressly tells them [*Deut. 9. 4.*] *For the Wickedness of these Nations the Lord doth drive them out from before thee.*

And indeed, besides the Authority of the Sacred History, we might urge Exceptions from all the best Histories of the World; which have transmitted to us Instances of such great Convulsions and Revolutions as the Wisest Men have always attributed to the Execution of a Divine Sentence, and made them confess (with *Nebuchadnezzar*) that the most High ruleth in the Kingdoms of Men. What could be a more visible Execution of Sentence against an evil work, than the ma

Instances of those Empires degenerated into National Vices, and subdu'd by People eminent for the contrary Virtues; and that the Four great Monarchies of the World should rise and fall, according to the Prophetick denunciation of *Daniel*, and the last, with all the diabolical Power, be subdu'd [*Daniel* 2. 44.] by the *Kingdom which shall never be destroy'd*. All which being plainly foretold and punctually fulfill'd, are undeniable Instances of a Divine Sentence executed in this World.

Nay, as to us of this Nation, I am perswaded we need not go farther for a true Exception to this General Rule, than our own late and our present surprizing wonderful Successes; against those who have dar'd to stand at God's righteous Bar, and make their Appeal to the Lord of Hosts, in the wicked Cause of a boundless Ambition and repeated Perfidiousness.

But then it must be confess'd such Interpositions are not usually discern'd by the generality of Mankind, who seldom look farther than those Causes that lye nearest to their own weak Apprehension; and so with them, that passes for a fortuitous Event, which is indeed a Divine Sentence.

And besides, even to those of better Discernment, such Exceptions to the general Rule are no good Objections against it; for still they observe that, in the ordinary Course of Providence, Sentence against an evil Work is not executed speedily; that is, neither immediately upon the Commission of those Crimes, nor at all in this World.

And therefore also they observe, That the Heart of the Sons of Men is fully set in them to do Evil; not universally, God be thank'd, but, as the Punishment is frequently deferr'd, so it is too frequently made the ground of more Wickedness. For surely, were the Divine Vengeance but ordinarily visible in this World, it would forcibly bend many of those stubborn Hearts whom the Divine Mercy does not move; and from hence we see in what Sense this Observation of *Solomon's*

is an apparent Truth. So that I may be allow'd to proceed,

Secondly, To enquire into the Reason of it; and shew how it comes to pass, that *Because Sentence is not executed speedily, therefore the Heart of the Sons of Men is fully set in them to do Evil.*

Their Heart being fully set in them to do Evil, is a Description of the most profligate Atheistical Men; those that are wicked by Principle, and not only act, but argue too against Religion, especial y the Terrors of another World. And accordingly there have not been wanting those that will dispute upon this very Observation in the Text; and because the Sentence is not present, will not believe that is to come

“ For (say they) the Nature of Justice requires a
 “ speedy, as well as a condign Punishment. The Cri-
 “ minal in the hand of Justice has no more right to
 “ be spar'd for a time, than to be acquitted for ever.
 “ And this also they observe to be the constant Rule
 “ of ail other Governments regularly administer'd,
 “ where Sentence is always speedily executed, unless
 “ some accidental Circumstance intervene.

“ From hence they conclude, that since the Na-
 “ ture of Justice is immutably and Eternal, it must
 “ equally affect God and Man; and if Human Go-
 “ vernment be (as Religion teaches us it is) a Copy
 “ and Transcript of the perfect Model of Divine Go-
 “ vernment, they ask whence proceeds such a wide
 “ difference in the Administration; insomuch that their
 “ Sentence is ordinarily executed, is ordinarily suspen-
 “ ded; and they by a speedy Course of Justice, procure
 “ an awful Regard to their Authority; while he is un-
 “ mov'd with those that call loudly for his Vengeance,
 “ that Blaspheme his Name, and dare his worst.

This I conceive is the utmost of that grand Argument against the Providence of God, and a Judgment to come, and is the true Reason why so many dis-
 believe,

believe, or believing disobey the Precepts of our most holy Religion.

We shall find upon Enquiry, all the different Atheistical *Tenets* resolvable to this one Principle: For this Reason it is, that some have deny'd the very Being of that God whose Sentence is deferr'd; others have excluded his Government and Providence out of the World, and divested him of his *Sentence*, tho' not of his *Being*. Some have believ'd there is no Malignity in the Nature of Sin, which would otherwise call for speedy Vengeance; and lastly, such there have been who have encertain'd a strong Opinion, that his boundless Mercy will reach all those who are only the Objects of his Justice, and so the threatn'd Sentence will never be executed.

All, or any of these fatal Notions, will quickly set the Hearts of the Sons of Men to do Evil; and, in all of them, the Suspension of the Divine Sentence is at the Bottom.

These are the Men that seem to be describ'd in the Text, and this is their great Support; but it is not these alone that are affected with this Argument; the very best of Men are not exempt from the contagious Influence of it; the Sentence being delay'd, loses of its Force, even with those who believe the final Execution of it.

This indeed is the Natural Effect of a weak and impair'd Understanding, to the Eyes of which the Truth of things lessens by *Distance of Time*, as material Objects do to our bodily Eyes by *Distance of Place*; and in both Cases the weaker Organ is, the shorter is the Sight: So that to all of us (God know) his Sentence lyes under the distant, and therefore disadvantageous Prospect of another World.

Which makes it of very great moment to us all, that this Argument should be truly stated, and maturely consider'd; and that is what I must endeavour to do in the.

Third Particular I propos'd, in which I am to offer something by way of Vindication of the Suspension of the Divine Sentence, in order to remove the formen- tion'd Objections against it, and the Abuses which Men make of it. And here I will attempt to prove distinctly,

I. That there is no Reason from the Nature of Justice, or the Ends of Government, why the Divine Sentence should be speedily executed; that is, why the Rewards and Punishments of Heav'n should be always, or ordinarily distributed in this World; but moreover,

II. That there is very good Reason to be given why they should not; which two Considerations together will, I hope, set this Matter in a clear Light.

I. There is no such Reason as was pretended in the Objection, from the Nature of Justice, or the Ends of Government, for a speedy Execution of the Divine Sentence.

When we consider strict Justice in Criminal Cases, we shall find all that it requires comprehended in this one Rule; namely, that there be more of Suffering in the Sentence, than there could be of Gratification in the Sin, otherwise the Sentence would lose its Terror and its Design.

But then Justice is not, in it self, confin'd to any Part of Time; because the greatest Interval of Impunity, may be more than made up by the greatness of the Punishment.

Some Sentences, or call them if you please Natural Consequences of Vice, are not speedily executed in this Life; which yet carry enough of Terror in them, to all considering Persons; how absurd is it then to suppose that the Omnipotent Eternal God cannot, at any distance of Time, nay, when Time it self shall be no more, make the Offender answer the full Demands of Justice, and pay the *utmost Farthing* of that great Debt he has incurr'd, both for his Crime and for his Reprieve too.

But still it is pleaded (and with more Colour) that
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the Ends of Government are best answer'd, and the greatest Reverence created to Laws, by the Speedy Execution of Sentence; and this must be confess'd to be agreeable to the best Wisdom of Human Government; but let us consider whether there are not some different Circumstances, which will enable us to account for this different Procedure.

1st, Human Government has only a limited Power, and is it self dependant, and liable to Destruction: And this makes it necessary that the Course of Justice here should be expeditious and exemplary; otherwise the bad Subjects may encrease so fast, in Number and Power, as much to weaken, and at last to subvert that Government.

Whereas, in the Kingdom of that one self-sufficient, self-depending Being, the Rebellion of an Host of Angels can (no farther than he thinks fit) disturb his Administration, much less rival or exceed his Power.

Nay, (which makes the Difference still wider) he can bring Good out of Evil, and make those numerous Crimes, which tend to weaken the Force of Human Government, to serve the Purposes of his.

2^{dly}, Human Judicatures can take no farther Cognisance of Crimes, than as they are evidenc'd by External Actions; and with them, therefore, when the Law is once visibly broken, Justice takes place immediately.

But it is the incommunicable Prerogative of the great Governor of the World, to judge the Heart; and therefore no Wonder his Sentence is executed differently from all others, since his Judgment is form'd by different Measures.

So that it seems absurd to draw any Parallel in the Case; since he may have many just and wise Reasons (some of which will hereafter be enumerated) for the Delay of his Sentence, which cannot affect human Judgment. But then,

3^{dly}, The main Difference lyes in this, that all human

man Government is, in it self, Temporary ; but the Government of God is, as himself, Eternal.

It is the Condition of us Creatures in this World, to measure by Time ; but he who has the Preserving Power of all Things in his Hands ; and of whole Power, consequently, the meanest Creature is an Eternal Object, he is not capable of what we call losing an Opportunity ; or being disappointed by the greatest Flux of Time. Nay, so far is the Case different, that past, present, and to come, are, in reality one and the same thing to his all-comprehensive Knowledge ; as St. Peter significantly expresses it, *One Day is with the Lord as a thousand Years, and a thousand Years as one Day.* [2 Pet. 3. 8.]

How then shall we Mortals dare to pronounce any thing amiss in his Government, who being confin'd to so small a Prospect, can never see the Length of any of his Designs ; and when we know that he is not capable of a bare temporary Design, which therefore Time cannot alter or destroy ?

Now all these are very material Circumstances, in which the Government of God and Man are as different as their respective Natures are ; and therefore altho' the Eternal Rule of Justice is the same to both, yet the Case we see is not, and therefore the Rule cannot be indifferently apply'd to either.

And now I conceive the Way is open for me to make it appear, that as there is no Reason to be given from the Nature of Justice, or the Ends of Government, why God should immediately punish, so there is also,

I I. Very good Reason to be given, why he should not ; that is, why he should not always, or ordinarily, take immediate Vengeance upon Provocation ; for that there have been some awak'ning Notices of Providence, has been already suggested, and (blessed be his Name) we here present are not insensible of them.

But now the Reason of this ordinary Suspension of
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Sentence, which I am speaking of, cannot indeed come from the Sinner's Side ; who becomes obnoxious to Justice , that Moment he commences an Offender.

But St. Peter (in the Case before us) draws the Reason from a better Head, from the Fountain of Goodness and Mercy ; *The Lord (says he) is not slack , as some Men count Slackness ; but is long-suffering to us ward , not willing that any should perish , but that all should come to Repentance. (Ibid. 3. 9.)*

It is by the Divine Mercy , in the Gospel-Covenant, that our Repentance is accepted of for perfect Obedience; and it is by his merciful Providence , that he delays the Execution of Sentence, in order to that Repentance.

For were every Sinner punish'd immediately according to his Demerit (and if it were necessary in one , it it would be so in all) this would indeed display the Divine Justice throughout the World , but to the speedy Destruction of the whole Race of Mankind.

Wherefore methinks it might become those who make a Part of the corrupt Mass , gratefully to admit this for a good Reason, why he does not here *enter into Judgment with his Servants ; since in his Sight shall no Man living be justify'd.*

But besides this, we Christians are promis'd Salvation upon the Terms of Faith in the Promises of God , and sincere Obedience flowing from that Faith. Now if all the Happiness and Glory of Eternal Life (and all of it wilfully forfeited) can demand it of us , as a Qualification , that for the short Space of our Lives we *walk by Faith* ; then it is equally unreasonable to expect, that we should *walk by Sight* ; as we should do were Sentence speedily executed.

For this would destroy the very Nature and Being of our Christian Faith ; and such a Plea as the Devil us'd against *Job* , would be good against every Man else ; *Doth he serve God for nought ?* He dreads his Thunder, but he does not love his Law.

Nay, we may venture one Step farther , and truly say

say that the speedy Execution of Sentence, would not only destroy all Christian Faith, but also Moral Virtue; which does necessarily require a Principle above temporal Rewards and Punishments; whereas were the Divine Vengeance flagrant in our Sight, Virtue would quickly lose its Charms, Conscience its Power, and Fear only, a slavish degenerate Fear, would predominate thro the World.

From whence we may discern the perfect Harmony between Natural and Reveal'd Religion, in the great Article of a Judgment to come; since, even to our dark Faculties, things appear (when duly consider'd) as they ought to be; and since the Judge of all the Earth must do right, their seeming Irregularities are only better Prefages of a future State.

Having thus far consider'd the Meaning and Extent of Solomon's Observation; and having shown the Truth of it, that is, how the Delay of the Divine Sentence causes the Hearts of the Sons of Men to be fully set in them to do Evil; But having attempted to prove, withal, that this is as absurd as it is an impious Abuse of the Divine Wisdom and Mercy in his Providential Administration; it remains only that in the

Fourth and last Place, I briefly lay before you some good Use, which I conceive we ought to make of the Delay of the Divine Sentence, whilst others so grossly abuse it.

And now I hope I may bespeak you all, as St. Peter did the Primitive Christians on the like Occasion, of the Scoffers ridiculing the Promise of our Lord's coming to Judgment; *Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the Error of the Wicked, fall from your own Steadfastness.* [1 Pet. 3. 17.]

Ye know that present Impunity is no Refuge from the Sentence of an Omnipotent, Omniscient, Eternal Judge; but that Christianity, nay and Morality too, does clearly account for the Delay of it. And that it will

will one Day come, ye know is peremptory declar'd by that Revelation, to which God has set the Seal of his miraculous Power, and guarded it with sufficient Proof and Demonstration, down to this Day. Nay, even that it will come, may be strongly argu'd from what I suggested in the Beginning of my Discourse; that we do not want undoubted Instances wherein Sentence has been speedily executed in this World.

For if any Sin merits the Divine Wrath, all Sin does; *Vengeance is his, and he will repay.* He acts by the same immutable Eternal Rules of perfect Justice, and it is nothing but the Variety of our Circumstances, which makes his Dispensations seem various to us. And if we are but very weak and incompetent Judges of what Circumstances are good or evil to us in this World only; how much less capable are we of judging concerning his Providential Administration, which takes in Eternity.

But this we know undoubtedly, That when the present World, with all the Appendages to it, shall pass away; and when God shall pronounce the *last Sentence*, it must, according to our Reason and Religion too, indiscriminably extend to every evil Work.

We do not, therefore, want Preservatives against the *Error of the Wicked*; nor Motives sufficient to keep up in our Minds a constant and vigourous Sense of our Duty, equally to deter from private Sin, and encourage secret Piety. All things are *open and naked to him with whom we have to do*; and all thing will, e'er long, be naked to the Sight of Men and Angels.

I said, *e'er long*; for the Wise Man speaks after the Manner of Men, when he supposes Sentence is not speedily executed; for, in reality, it is exceeding speedy, if we reflect on the infinite Importance of that which depends upon it.

Eternity is enough to bring to nothing the Contemplation of ten thousand Ages; and yet that Great Day, on which Eternity depends, is in Effect, at no farther Di-

Distance from us , than we our selves are from the Grave.

Oh ! consider this , *ye that forget God , lest he pluck you away suddenly , and there be none to deliver you ;* none to deliver you from the Terrors of that Day ; when, in dreadful Formality , our Lord shall erect his high Court of universal Justice ; when in vain shall they call for the Mountains to cover them , who are oppress'd with the heavier Load of Guilt , and their own self-condemning Heart , shall have anticipated upon them the just and irreversib e Sentence.

But we have not only these Terrors of the Lord, whereby to persuade Men ; the Sentence is not only threaten'd , but at the same time there is promis'd Salvation from it. We can beseech you by the Mercies of God, Mercies that will shower down upon you , even in this World ; for tho' the Sentence against an evil Work is deferr'd , yet so is not all the Reward, of that Christian Labour which proceedeth from a Mind enlighten'd with the Promises of God , and a Heart fir'd with Divine Love. This is the only Disposition for Happiness in the midst of Sin and Sorrow , and not only disposes us to be happy , but if we are Believers , it will be unto us *according to our Faith* ; if we have *our Conversation in Heaven* , we must , all the while , taste of the Joys of the Place.

And oh ! How calm and serene is the Breast where this stedfast Faith and sincere Piety dwell ? There arises no Cloud of Distrust , no Perplexity from prosperous Wickedness ; nor is their Peace and Tranquility shaken , tho' even their own most virtuous and pious Endeavours should meet with ill Returns from Men ; and *Sentence is not speedily executed against that evil Work.*

For , a just Return they do not expect here , and are not therefore perplex'd or disappointed for want of it ; but have happily learn'd to resolve all into the single Consideration of the great Day of Retribution.

In the mean time , all things appear equal to them,
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because all appear under the Direction of unerring Wisdom ; and their Peace rests upon this Foundation, which , as the Apostle expresses it , *standeth sure ; the Lord knoweth them that are his.* [2 Tim. 2. 9.] This is the Rock , on which having built , they are equally unmov'd with the stormy Winds of Adversity , and the undermining Flood of Prosperity ; in a Word , theirs is that *Peace of God* , which this World can neither give nor take away.

Thus it is , that while the Infidel uneasy World *rises up early , and late takes rest to eat the Bread of Carefulness , he giveth his beloved Sleep.* Sleep upon the Bed of Security , and under his own protecting Wings , who can guard them through Life and Death ; who can preserve them even in the Place of Corruption , and finally raise them up again triumphant over Sin and the Grave : Then to hear indeed the dreadful Sentence against every evil Work , but to receive that blessed one , which will translate them into the glorious *Kingdom , prepar'd for them from the beginning of the World.*

Now , that we may all partake in their Reward , Almighty God incline us all to imitate their Example , and preserve us from the contagious Influence of those whose *Hearts are fully set in them to do Evil* ; for the sake of the Holy Jesus ; to whom with the Father , and Blessed Spirit , be ascrib'd by us and the whole Creation , Eternal Praise , Dominion and Glory. *Amen.*

F I N I S.

**A CATALOGUE of Sermons Printed and Sold by
Henry Hills in Black-Fryars near the Water-side.
Price One Penny each.**

TWO of Sir *William Daws*, Bar. one at *Cambridge*, on the 5th of *Nov.* 1706. and the other before the *Queen*, *Nov.* 19. 1704.

One of the *Bishop of Norwich* before Her Majesty, *March* 8th, 1705. on her happy Accession to the Crown.

Two of the *Bishop of Lincoln's*, one *Decemb.* 31, 1705. and the other *Novemb.* 5. 1705.

One of *Dr. Willis's* Dean of *Lincoln*, on the 5th of *Nov.* 1705.

One of *Dr. Blackhal*, his Commencement Sermon before the University of *Cambridge*, *June* 30, 1700.

Three of *Dr. Parsons's*, call'd *The First-Fruits of the Gentiles*, &c. at *Salisbury*.

Two of *Dr. Moss*, one before the *Queen*, *April* 22d, 1706. The other a Spittle-Sermon *Wednesday* in *Easter-week*, 1706.

Two of the *Archbish of York*, one before the *Queen*, at Her Coronation. The other, *The Government of the Thoughts*, before the *King and Queen*.

One of *Dr. Clarke*, before the *Queen*, *Decemb.* 30, 1705.

Two of *Dr. Stanhope*, One before the *Bishops*, &c. *Octob.* 25, 1705. The other before the *Queen*, at *St. Paul's*, 1706.

One of the *Dr. Blackburn's* before the *Queen*, *Decemb.* 9, 1705.

A Sermon call'd *The Royal Merchant*, before his Majesty *King Charles the Second*, at *Whithall*.

One of the *Bishop of Gloucester's* at *Gild-Hall*, the 7th of *Septemb.* 1704, being a Thanksgiving for overcoming the *French and Bavarians*.

Two of *Mr. Knagg's*, one a Perswasive to Contentment, the other *God with us*,

One of *Dr. Hoadly* before the Lord Mayor, &c. *Septemb.* 29. 1705.

Three of *Dr. Kenner's*; Two upon the Murder of *King Charles the First*, *Jan.* 30, 1703, 1705. The other before the *Queen*, *June* 23, 1706.

One of the *Bishop of St. Asaph*, before the *House of Lords*, *January* 30, 1705.

One of *Mr. Stubs*, on *May* 26, 1706. being a Preparatory to the General Thanksgiving.

One of *Mr. Manningham*, before the *Queen* at *Windsor*, *Aug.* 4, 1706.

One of *Mr. Sprint*, *The Bridewoman's Counsellor*, at a *Wedding*, 1696.

One of his Grace *John* late *Arch. of Canterbury*, 1694, Of evil speaking.

One by *W. Worton B. D.* *The Rights of the Clergy in the Christian Church Asserted*. In Answer to, *The Rights of the Christian Church asserted*.

An Epitome of the *Protestant Religion*, shewing when it began, why the People so call'd, of the 3 Creeds, wherefore Beople stand when one is said: How and when Infant Baptism came to be used; when and wherefore God-fathers and God-mothers came to be ordain'd, and the Sign of the Cross us'd, when and how Sprinkling came to be used instead of Dipping, &c.

